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ABSTRACT

A research project undertaken in York, Ontario, Canada aimed to raise literacy standards in the primary division and to ensure that all children in Grade 1 read to the Grade 1 standard (as determined by Reading Recovery levels, the school board, and the Ontario Ministry of Education). Focus was placed on acquiring high quality leveled literature for reading programs and providing professional development to encourage balanced literacy programs in all primary classrooms (K-2). Over a 3-year period, teaching practices were modified and refined to address needs determined by results. Particular attention was directed to addressing the needs of low-achieving students and to literacy practices in the Kindergarten classroom to prepare children for Grade 1. Formal and anecdotal data confirmed that the vast majority of children can reach and be maintained within the average range in the primary grades. It seemed clear that data motivated and directed change, that professional development is needed to ensure changing teaching practices and that well-developed resources are vital to a successful literacy program. Includes two data tables. Contains a 4-item bibliography. (Author/NKA)

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by Marlene Waiser

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Raising Literacy Standards in the Primary Division

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Doncrest Public School - York Region District School Board - 2000

The aim of this research project was to raise literacy standards in the primary division and to ensure that all children in grade one read to the grade one standard. Focus was placed on acquiring high quality levelled literature for reading programs and providing professional development to encourage balanced literacy programs in all primary classrooms (K-2). Over a three year period, teaching practices were modified and refined to address needs determined by results. Particular attention was directed to addressing the needs of low achieving students and to literacy practices in the Kindergarten classroom to prepare children for grade one. Formal and anecdotal data confirmed that the vast majority of children can reach and be maintained within the average range in the primary grades. It seemed clear that data motivated and directed change, that professional development is needed to ensure changing teaching practices and that well-developed resources are vital to a successful literacy program

Teachers of Reading Recovery learn to refine their teaching practices to enable children who begin grade one with the fewest prerequisite skills in literacy, to read and write in a relatively short period of time, within twenty weeks. Marie Clay presents effective processing systems for reading and writing (Becoming Literate, 1991) and has established methods for teaching these systems (Reading Recovery, A Guidebook for Teachers, 1993). Adapting these methods for all children working in their "zone of proximal development", the optimum learning zone (L.Vygotsky, 1986), could make it possible for almost all children to read and write within the average range during their grade one year at school. When this research project began these practices were being used in Reading Recovery lessons with children who were determined to need the most support in literacy. When these same children completed their Reading Recovery programs, they were able to read at a higher level than most of the other children in class and often with the best readers.

The resources used in Reading Recovery programs are high quality levelled literature series (Watson, 1996). These books were not on provincially approved or Board approved book lists and therefore not available to classroom teachers.

It seemed clear that processing systems that were so effective for teaching the neediest young students to read and write, could and should be adapted and used with all students to support effective learning in reading and writing. It was also reasonable to predict that well-developed, levelled books would make it easier to teach reading and easier for children to learn to read.

The aim of the research project was to raise literacy standards in the primary division and to ensure that all children in grade one read to the grade one standard as determined by Reading Recovery levels, the school board and the Ontario Ministry of Education. It was necessary to adapt and apply Reading Recovery theory and practice to classroom teaching and to evaluate the effect on reading success in the primary grades. The successful adaptation of theory and practice in reading and writing would help teachers develop a greater understanding of the processes of learning to read and write and enable them to refine their classroom teaching practices to ensure greater effectiveness and student success.

Method

Research was conducted to determine and select high quality levelled literature for reading. Professional development was provided to encourage balanced literacy programs in all primary classrooms. Teachers attended four workshops on elements of balanced literacy presented by a Reading Recovery Teacher Leader. In the second year of the study, professional development focussed on learning more about the process of learning to read and on how to teach reading strategies effectively. All primary teachers took part in the workshops. Initially, there were three grade one and three grade two classes and two senior Kindergarten classes. The number of primary children in the school declined and in the third year of the project, there were two of each grade.

Data was collected using a series of assessments called the Observation Survey (Clay, 1993). It is used with grade one children who, based on teacher judgement, appear to lack the prerequisite skills in reading and writing. It includes data on letter identification, two tests of word knowledge, concepts about print, writing vocabulary, hearing sounds in words/letter-sound relationships and oral reading. The oral reading assessment is known as a Running Record and it provides accurate, consistent data on children's reading and accuracy levels. The data collected with the Observation Survey was used to determine reading levels, as well as, patterns of knowledge in specific areas of reading and writing.

A Primary Reading survey was completed by all primary divisions in the school district, using running records to determine reading levels. It provided summary data on end of year reading levels by grade. The information for the Primary Reading Survey provided a quick check of the number of children reading to the grade one standard, as well as, the number of children not yet reading to the standard.

Teachers' observations and comments also provided necessary information.

Over a three year period, teaching practices were modified and refined to address needs determined by results. Elements of balanced reading were used in each classroom to varying degrees although not all elements were used in each class. The foundation of the project was guided reading. Reading groups were formed and seen daily or on alternating days in grades one and two. Particular attention was directed to addressing the needs of low achieving students. In the third year of the project, the lowest reading groups were seen daily while the other groups were seen on alternating days. In the Kindergarten classroom, opportunities to develop literacy skills were increased to prepare children for grade one. Shared reading and interactive writing became an integral part of the program and guided reading groups were conducted in the spring term.

Results

Year One

In the first year of the project, teachers were not able to report with evidence, the performance criteria set out in the reading survey. They were not familiar with new reading levels and how to formally assess them. Reading levels were based on individual teacher's judgements of reading ability. Based on that information, 13 children, of the 50 children in grade one, were not reading to the end of grade one, 25% of the grade one children. Ten children had been discontinued from Reading Recovery that year. Without Reading Recovery, the data suggests that 23 children of 50 children in grade one would not have read to Level 16, determined to be the end of grade one. More than one third of the children would not have reached expected reading levels.

Year Two

In the second year of the project, the teachers were able to fully apply the performance criteria, including reading levels. The Primary Reading Survey showed that 8 children, of the 42 children in grade one, did not read to Level 16, less than 20% of the children in grade one. Eight children discontinued from Reading Recovery. The data suggests that without Reading Recovery, 16 children would not have been reading to Level 16. There were one-third fewer children not reading to the end of grade one at the end of the second year of the project.

At the end of the second year, teachers were pleased with the results they saw. They felt that all children were reading to a higher level than they had seen in previous years and were writing better as well. Many teachers commented that the new standard of reading expectations was higher than they had previously used to assess children's reading and that more children were reaching that standard. The teachers reported that they would never have been able to achieve the results they got without the quality of literature now available to them or without levelled literature.

Running records, though somewhat challenging to learn to administer, did provide a standard source of assessment by which all children could be evaluated. Teachers collaborated on book selection for determining children's reading levels and on scoring the records. They felt that they were developing a common understanding of reading achievement in the primary grades.

The Kindergarten teacher reported higher levels of skill development than she had seen before, after using shared reading and interactive writing extensively. Many children had developed greater knowledge of letter names and sounds and many children were writing independently using developmental spelling.

The Observation Survey was completed in the fall of grade one and confirmed the Kindergarten teacher's observations. The data showed academic strengths and weaknesses in skill development among the neediest children coming out of Kindergarten. The subtest on Letter Identification showed scores ranging from the third to the sixth stanine, on Hearing Sounds in Words from the second to the sixth stanine and on Concepts About Print (CAP) from the second to the fourth stanine. The subtests on Word Knowledge for reading and Writing Vocabulary showed stanines of one, with raw scores of zero or one.

In the fall, the grade one teachers also confirmed that the children's knowledge of letter names was better than ever before and that the majority of children were able to record ideas in writing independently. The children were using developmental spelling in their writing but conventional spelling was being used for some high frequency words, such as "is". The teachers also reported that the children, even with these new skills, were not yet reading though they seemed to begin to read faster than in previous years and were progressing faster as well.

Year Three

In the third year of the project, 47 children, all but two grade one children read to Level 16 or beyond, by the end of grade one. Of the two who did not reach Level 16, one was to be 'carried over' in Reading Recovery and discontinued when she reached grade level expectations. (That took place the following October.) The other student was an ESL 1 student who had not learned sufficient English to read. Reading achievement had improved among all children but especially among the lowest third of students.

Of the 46 Kindergarten students, eight read to Level 16, the end of grade one, 25 read to Levels 3-5 and 12 read to Levels 1-2. There was only one child at Level 0 and she was a newly arrived ESL student and had not learned sufficient English to begin reading. Most children were again able to write independently using some high frequency words and developmental spelling. The teacher observed that several children determined to be ESL Level 1 contributed to book discussions in a small group in a way they never did in the large class group.

On assessment in the fall of the next year, the grade one teachers reported that they had never had so many children entering grade one reading independently or beginning to read. They also reported that there was a greater gap between children's reading levels than ever before. There were a large number of children, 8-10 in each class , who were assessed at Level 0. Some of these children came from Kindergarten classes outside our school. Some were the ESL 1 students who had read at Level 1-2 and had not maintained their skills over the summer.

The higher reading standards achieved in Grade one in Year 3 were replicated the next year.

	Number of Grade 1 students	Number of Grade 1 students **reading at/above Level 16**	% Grade 1 students **reading at/above Level 16**	Number of Grade 1 students **reading below Level 16**
Year 1	**50**	**37***	**74%***	**13**
Year 2	**42**	**34**	**81%**	**8**
Year 3	**49**	**47**	**96%**	**2**
Year 4	**52**	**50**	**96%**	**2**

*Standardized assessments were not used.

Analysis and Conclusions

Years One and Two

Improvement in reading levels among all grade one children and in the number of children reading to the grade one standard suggests that changes in practice were working to help students achieve higher standards but more improvement was needed to ensure that all children meet the standard of reading expectations set by the Ministry. The data showed that too many children were still not reaching Level 16. It would be necessary to refine the strategies used to teach the lowest readers to ensure that approximately 98% of the children read to Level 16.

Teachers' comments, that all children were reading to a higher level and that the standard of reading expectations was higher than they had used before to assess children's reading achievement, would make the results achieved all the more remarkable. It would appear that children were making greater gains than the data suggests.

Running records came to be seen as the most important assessment tool for reading. It provided teachers with a common language to discuss reading achievement, with a tool to direct their teaching and achieve consistent and accurate evaluation of all children's reading progress. Teacher assessments of the new levelled literature suggested that well-developed resources for reading are vital to success in raising standards.

Kindergarten children were developing many concepts and skills for reading and writing. Skills for writing had developed in line with the balance of literacy presented in the Kindergarten program. Interactive writing had been the main focus and children demonstrated skills needed to write independently, including knowledge of letters and sounds and some knowledge of high frequency words. Shared reading and interactive writing appear to have helped reinforce concepts of print needed to read and write, such as directionality and punctuation. Kindergarten children seemed more ready to learn to read and write leaving Kindergarten than in previous years. The children demonstrated literacy item knowledge but this was not enough to enable them to read.

Year Three

It appears that increased literacy opportunities in Kindergarten coupled with balanced literacy programs, including guided reading and the use assessment to inform teaching will allow most grade one children to reach the reading expectations set by the Ministry. Our experience suggests that it takes additional opportunities for the lowest children to reach expected levels but that with skilful assessment, programming and teaching, all children can learn and most can be maintained within the average range. The gap between children's reading levels, assessed in September in grade one, meant that it was easier to identify accurately which children needed more assistance.

Instructional strategies and program modifications helped most children reach expected reading levels (Levels 3-5) in Kindergarten. Further attention needs to be directed towards opportunities and strategies to allow more children to reach expected reading levels and to ensure that early reading behaviours carry over the summer.

The opportunity to discuss pictures in books during guided reading lessons provides opportunities for ESL children and children with below average language skills to use new vocabulary and expressions, a benefit not anticipated. In addition, small guided reading groups appear to provide a safe environment in which the children are willing to take the risk of speaking in their second language with others at the same level.

Kindergarten Reading Results - Year 3				
Achievement Level	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Reading Levels	Level 0	Level 1-2	Level 3-5	Level 6
# of children	**1**	**12**	**25**	**8**
Percentage	**28%**		**72%**	

Overall Conclusions

Data, obtained from the Primary Reading Survey and from the Observation Survey, motivated change. The data provided clear information to direct change. It was the data from the Primary Reading Survey, based on running records, that caused the grade one teachers to request additional professional development in guided reading to enable them to help all their students reach expected levels. Running records provided the teachers with a common language to discuss reading achievement, a tool to direct instruction and to assess children's reading levels, consistently and accurately. It was patterns of data from the Observation Survey that motivated the Kindergarten teacher to modify her classroom literacy program to ensure that children were gaining the readiness skills in all areas of literacy to enable them to reach expected levels.

Data from both Kindergarten and grade one show that even with a literacy rich program, there are some children who require additional experiences in reading and writing in order to reach the average range of achievement. Regular assessment and informed instruction can help most of these children to reach grade level expectations.

Overall, considerable professional development in the area of literacy and assessment is needed to prepare teachers to meet the needs of all children, to ensure that all children learn to read and write and to progress at a rate that will enable them to work within the average range. Excellent resources, well-developed, levelled literature series used for guided reading are an essential part of a successful reading program. Used in combination with informed instruction, levelled literature will help children in all primary grades achieve expectations.

All children can learn. The vast majority of children can learn to read and write, can reach reading and writing standards for their grade and can be maintained within the average range during the primary grades with good first teaching. Common standards, excellent resources, balanced literacy practices and consistent assessment informing teaching practices can raise literacy standards and assure that children become successful readers and writers.

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